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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: FORMER PRESIDENTS BUSH AND CLINTON
DISCUSS TSUNAMI RECOVERY WITH PRESIDENT KUMARATUNGA -
CORRECTION TO ADD ADDRESSEE HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

1. (SBU) Summary. In a February 20 meeting, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga offered former Presidents George H.W. Bush and William J. Clinton an assessment of Sri Lanka's post-tsunami progress, including immediate relief efforts and longer-term reconstruction plans. President Kumaratunga also described cooperation between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whom she described as "flexible" and interested in working with the GSL to set up reconstruction mechanisms in LTTE areas. In order to aid its economic recovery, the GSL requested G-7 debt relief for Sri Lanka's USD 1.5 billion of debt, as well as duty relief for the apparel industry. End Summary.

2. (U) Former Presidents George H.W. Bush and William J. Clinton met Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga for a discussion and dinner on February 20. At the discussion, former Presidents Bush and Clinton were accompanied by Ambassador to Sri Lanka Jeffrey J. Lunsford; Ambassador Douglas Hartwick; Mark Ward, USAID Deputy Administrator for Near East and Asia; Carol Becker, USAID Mission Director for Sri Lanka; Jean Becker, Chief of Staff to former President Bush; and Laura Graham, Chief of Staff to former President Clinton. President Kumaratunga was joined by Lakshman Kadirgamar, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Mangala Samaraweera, Minister of Ports, Aviation, Media and Information; P.B. Jayasundera, Secretary to the Ministry of Finance and Planning; Mano Titawella; Chairman of Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN); H.M.G.S. Palihakkara, Secretary to the Foreign Ministry; and W.J.S. Karunaratne, Secretary to President Kumaratunga.

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Immediate GSL Disaster Response

3. (U) In the pre-dinner discussion, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga offered former Presidents Bush and Clinton an assessment of Sri Lanka's post-tsunami progress. She explained that while Sri Lanka was not prepared for such a disaster, the Sri Lankan people "rallied round magnificently" after the waves hit, collecting food and medication for immediate distribution to affected areas. The Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) relief efforts, including food distribution to conflict-affected areas in the north and east, began immediately. Where the government was not able to go, the Sri Lankan people went themselves, filling in the gaps. President Kumaratunga noted that as a result there "was no starvation and no epidemics." Immediately after the tsunami, the GSL opened a National Operations Center, housed in the President's Office, to coordinate the efforts of the GSL and various UN and other agencies.

4. (U) Within three weeks of the December 26 tsunami, Kumaratunga said, the GSL had assessed

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damage to infrastructure--roads, hospitals, schools, and water supplies--and formed a special task force to plan reconstruction efforts. Under the direction of Chairman Mano Titawella (who sat in on the meeting), the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN) began to match assistance efforts with identified reconstruction projects. President Kumaratunga also praised the work of U.S. Marines, and said they did "a brilliant job."

15. (U) Both former U.S. Presidents inquired about efforts to replace tsunami-destroyed fishing boats, which President Kumaratunga numbered at over 15,000. She admitted that replacing these boats, "not an easy thing to get," was a large short-term economic challenge facing Sri Lanka.

Habitation Banned in 100 m Coastal Zone

16. (SBU) President Kumaratunga discussed the GSL's ban on building dwellings within 100 m of the sea, explaining that after the identification of a geological fault line 300 km south of the island, "Sri Lanka is now in a danger zone." People displaced from these areas will be able to keep land within the 100 m zone, but will not be able to live on it. Landless Sri Lankans displaced from the zone will be given parcels of GSL land, including deeds of ownership.

President Kumaratunga's Post-Tsunami View of the LTTE

17. (SBU) President George H.W. Bush inquired about cooperation between Tamil people in the north and the GSL. President Kumaratunga noted that there is a distinction between Tamil citizens and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who describe themselves as the "sole representatives of the Tamil people." The President added, "The Tamil people do not consider (this to be true)," but the LTTE has successfully eliminated all other leaders." People in the north, she said, "do not dare open their mouths against the LTTE." President Kumaratunga referenced the suicide bomber who tried to kill her in 1999, "She took an eye from me, but not more," and explained that for the sake of peace, there is a nearly three-year old ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in effect. She noted that the LTTE violates the ceasefire agreement "here and there," referring specifically to child conscription, but, "apart from that, at least there is no war."

18. (SBU) After 16 or 17 years of disdaining government offers to develop Tamil areas, President Kumaratunga explained, the LTTE has for the first time decided to pursue development in areas in the north. Although the LTTE does not like the GSL to be in those areas, they "do like the UN agencies working there," including UNICEF, UNHCR and UNDP. After the tsunami, President Kumaratunga said that the LTTE has been "rather flexible," and had asked to talk to the GSL about a practical reconstruction mechanism in their areas. For its part, she continued, the GSL sent relief supplies like food, vehicles and water pumps to the north immediately after the tsunami.

Post-Tsunami Economic Challenges

19. (SBU) President Clinton asked President Kumaratunga if there was one specific request he and President Bush could take back to the U.S. The President turned to Secretary to the Ministry of Finance and Planning P.B. Jayasundera, who responded that G-7 debt relief for Sri Lanka's USD 1.5 billion of debt and duty concessions in the apparel industry would be most helpful. TAFREN Chairman Mano Titawella added that apparel duties could be addressed through a Free Trade Agreement (N.B. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka has already formally requested a one-year deferral of debt payments under the G-7 initiative. It was not clear if Jayasundera was referring to this proposal, or if he was suggesting additional debt relief. We will contact him to clarify.)

110. (SBU) President Kumaratunga explained that apparel is Sri Lanka's major export, with most garments destined for the U.S. She asked for a one to two year extension, "or until we recover from tsunami shock," of the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA). Jayasundera noted that by increasing apparel exports, the GSL hopes to make up for lost tourism revenues.

11. (SBU) Ambassador Lunstead pointed out that another positive message President Bush and President Clinton could take back to the U.S. is to encourage tourists to return to Sri Lanka by reminding them that most of the country is unharmed, as only a narrow band of land was affected by the tsunami. President Kumaratunga seconded this idea enthusiastically.

12. (U) President Kumaratunga, addressing Presidents Bush and Clinton, expressed her deep appreciation to both men for taking time "to come all this way to see the devastation," and for the assistance the USG and the UN has given Sri Lanka. She also said that what mattered most was the concern and humanitarian warmth shown by the USG and the American people.

13. (U) Former Presidents Bush and Clinton did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.

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